

Bollywood lithographs make it to auction block

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FEBRUARY 19

WHO would have imagined that a 1941 *Sikandar* or a 1951 *Deedar* lithographic poster print would be up for bids at a premium auction house in India? That day seems to have arrived as Osian's plans to throw open the doors of Tata Theatre on March 18. Not only for bidders with a paddle, but also for anyone who may be interested, these posters will be up for grabs. Once plastered on the walls of the 1930s, 1940s or 1950s streets, these posters have been raised to the status of memorabilia and art.

Besides taking a trip down memory lane with epics like *Pakeezah*, *Mother India* and *Mughal-e-Azam*, the posters have been treated (de-acidified and lined with an alkaline buffer) in Lucknow to extend the short life of paper. What would have been sold as



Neville Tuli with the lithographs to be auctioned at Osian's on March 18

scrap will now hang alongside a Jamini Roy or a Gaitonde. If this sounds unbelievable, there's more. A *Diler Daku* poster sold in New York for \$829!

For those who say that New Yorkers usually have more money than good taste, the repartee is that, as past experience testifies, many trends originating in the West find their way into bourgeois drawing rooms in India.

Is the Indian market ready for this kind of 'art'? Neville Tuli, the man behind Osian's, is certain that the time has come to make people fall in love with the subject of popular Hindi cinema. "Even if one doesn't have the emotional link with the film, there is the fine graphic quality and, of course, the money invested in it for preservation. By building an infrastructure around the history of Indian

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Pakeezah with Husains

Cinema, one adds value to it. That is the key point."

Will a price tag add respect to what can best be described as popular art? Waving away scepticism, Tuli quickly affirms, "The lobby cards, black & white stills are of international quality and I have no doubt that a small market already exists. It will slowly expand. After all, when Husain first came into the market, his works sold in four digit figures. Now, people spend lakhs."

Vivek Divan, a lawyer who works for the Layers Collective, has a small collection of film posters that adorn the living room, hanging cheek by jowl with a Lautrec print. Riyad Wadia is another avid collector. And so is Sriram Tamrakar, a film lecturer in Indore, one of Tuli's key sources for the posters.

"In many cases people like N Gosh have a great collection but no proper means of preserving it. By bringing these works into the public sphere, one generates interest, awareness and preserves hand-painted prints that are no longer being made," says Tuli.

The posters, probably bought from collectors at a much cheaper price, are worth the extra that they will now cost, he adds. "After preserving them, posters that would otherwise last four to five years will now last a good 70 years."

Besides the film buffs and people actually belonging to the film fraternity, Tuli hopes to get a wider audience at the auction. "That is why this time we have not made it mandatory for the people to buy the catalogue to enter. But at the end of the day the auction is to generate funds to support the archive," he concludes.